

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE A25

NEW YORK TIMES

19 March, 1985

IN THE NATION | Tom Wicker

# Uncle Sam's Contras

**N**othing could have disclosed more clearly the sheer arrogance of Ronald Reagan's policy toward the recognized Government of Nicaragua than his news conference statement that its "present structure" would have to be removed unless "they'd say uncle."

Saying "uncle" is, after all, like "throwing in the towel," a recognized symbol of surrender. In Central America, moreover, such a remark from a U.S. President must have carried a particularly contemptuous ring — and not just in Managua. Throughout that region, "Uncle Sam" — owing to his long economic domination and frequent military interventions — is by no means the loved and admired figure he is in the United States.

Mr. Reagan's news conference remarks at least cleared away his shabby pretense that he only wanted the Nicaraguan Government to stop shipping arms to anti-Government guerrillas in El Salvador — an activity never proved, anyway. And now his aides are assiduously pointing out that the Boland Amendment — prohibiting expenditure of Federal funds to overthrow the Nicaraguan Government — is no longer in force.

So if Congress now appropriates the \$14 million with which Mr. Reagan wants to resume aid to the so-called Nicaraguan Democratic Force — better known as "contras" — Congress in fact will be voting funds for the military overthrow of the Sandinista Government in Managua. Senior contra leaders, in interviews with James LeMoyne of The New York Times, have conceded what was obvious all along — their objective is now and has been from the start to throw out the Sandinistas and to take their places in power.

It's clear also that Mr. Reagan lied to Congress, as well as the public, in obtaining the past appropriation of about \$80 million to support the contras. A senior member of the Senate Intelligence Committee — to which, if to anyone, the truth should have been confided — told me in 1984 that the Administration had assured the committee repeatedly that its only purpose was to interdict the alleged flow of arms from Nicaragua to the Salvadoran guerrillas. Now, after the bomb-

ing of Managua's airport, the mining of Nicaraguan harbors, the blowing up of Nicaragua's main oil depots, and the growth of the contras to an army of 12,000 to 14,000 men, a State Department official tells Joel Brinkley of The Times that arms interdiction never was the goal of aid to the contras.

That, he said, would have been "a fool's errand." Indeed, and it may be wondered if politically shrewd senators ever really believed such a transparent falsehood.

Mr. Reagan's intent to aid the contras in overthrowing the Sandinistas is not so intelligent, either. Contra foot soldiers are not, for the most part, mercenaries; but their military leaders are indelibly stained by former membership in the hated National Guard of the repressive Somoza regime, and their political leadership was hand-picked — as most of their supplies have been provided — by the C.I.A. Uncle Sam's not-so-hidden hand.

A counterrevolutionary force, backed by the C.I.A. and led by former National Guardsmen is the worst possible bet to gain popular support in Nicaragua; these are not Mao's fish swimming in the sea of the people. The very fact, moreover, that Nicaragua is under military attack by a force directed and supplied by that same Uncle Sam who has so often intervened in Central America — giving Nicaraguans, the last time, the Somoza dynasty — is bound to strengthen support for the Sandinista Government and improve Nicaraguan national unity in resisting external attack.

Perhaps as a reflection of these Nicaraguan realities, Mr. LeMoyne — visiting the contras' base camp on the Honduran-Nicaraguan border — found that most of the troops were peasants from the northern part of the country; few were either middle-class or from the more populous south. And since they began their war early in 1982, the contras have not been able to take and hold any substantial Nicaraguan town or territory, or to demonstrate enough support to make a provisional government seem plausible.

Thus, to resume support for the contras would be to commit the United States to a failing, probably doomed military force, not to a popular political movement; worse, to the overthrow by force and terrorism of a Government recognized throughout the world. And openly linking Ronald Reagan's prestige and credibility to that force and that objective would make all the more likely the ultimate participation of U.S. forces in what would be not so much another Vietnam as another Afghanistan. □